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Snohomish County Health Department Receiving Nearly \$1 Million in State Funds to Expand STI Health Services

The two-year pilot project is aimed at reducing an alarming increase in sexually transmitted infections

SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash., April 27, 2023 – The Snohomish County Health Department is set to receive \$975,000 in the 2023-25 Washington State budget to develop a two-year pilot project aimed at reducing sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The funding is to expand the Health Department’s STI program and establish an in-house clinic that would focus on equitable care including screening, treatment, and prevention education and services.

There has been a significant increase in STIs in recent years. Health services are crucial for interrupting transmission. That includes treating active infection, notifying people who have been exposed to get tested and treated, and providing information and resources for prevention.

“We’ve been seeing an alarming rise in the rates of sexually transmitted infections. Syphilis is particularly concerning, having more than doubled just since 2019,” Health Officer Dr. James Lewis said. “We’ve also received reports of congenital syphilis, where pregnant individuals with untreated syphilis pass the infection on to the baby. This is especially worrying after years with zero reported cases in the county. We know there are ways to prevent transmission and get these rising STI rates back down, and that’s what we hope to do with this state funding.”

The Health Department aims to provide testing for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV at the new clinic. Staff also would provide treatment for chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, along with connections to local resources for ongoing care for HIV patients.

Between 2019 and 2022, the number of STI cases reported in the county nearly doubled. Syphilis increased to 94 cases in 2022, compared to 46 in 2019. Multiple cases of congenital syphilis were reported each year in 2021 and 2022, after having zero cases from 2015 to 2020.

Other STIs also are up. Gonorrhea cases increased from 504 to 797 between 2015 and 2021, and chlamydia cases increased from 2,206 to 2,309 in the same timeframe. While new HIV cases are lower than they were a few years ago, they still are regularly reported, with 41 new HIV cases reported in the county last year.

This is not unique to Snohomish County. The Department’s goals are informed by [statewide recommendations that came out in late 2022](#) from a legislative advisory group focused on addressing the rise in STIs in Washington.

“We’re not replacing the healthcare resources already in our community, and our partnerships with healthcare providers remain essential. As public health, we want to build on those and expand in areas where more services can make the difference and disrupt the spread of disease,” Health Department Director Dennis Worsham said. “This is not only about the health of individuals, but also the health of our community. With the rapid increase in STI cases, we need to be able to quickly diagnose, treat, and notify partners who have been exposed so we can better interrupt transmission in Snohomish County. We are grateful for the support from the state legislators representing our communities.”

Local public health has worked for decades to reduce STIs. After funding cuts in the 2000s, the then-Snohomish Health District began referring case management to outside providers. The current STI program has continued to provide confidential HIV testing, sexual health education, partner counseling, and referrals for HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP.

Bringing testing, treatment, and case management into the same clinic space can reduce barriers and make crucial follow-up easier for clients. The department also plans to use the state funding to analyze information on current STI infections and related services, and to look at ways to reach populations most at risk.

It will take time to prepare for seeing clients on-site for testing and treatment. Next steps include hiring additional staff and purchasing supplies. The department plans to start offering expanded STI health services this summer, and to increase hours and services by the end of the year.

The plan is to provide service at the Health Department building at 3020 Rucker Ave. in Everett and expand to in-field services based on community need. STI health services continue to be available from healthcare providers around the county, and people should not wait to seek testing or treatment.

There are ways individuals in our community can help reduce transmission of sexually transmitted infections. The Health Department urges people to:

- Get tested if you are sexually active, particularly if you are or may become pregnant, or if you have multiple sexual partners or don’t know your partners’ sexual health history.
- Talk to your partner(s) about your and their sexual health history.
- Use a condom. Even if you use other methods for birth control, a condom can help protect against multiple STIs while a contraceptive pill or implant will not.
- If you do have a positive STI screening, follow through with treatment.

The Snohomish County Health Department is always working for a safer, healthier community. To learn more, visit www.snohd.org.

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